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U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT
29 MARCH 1982

What Reagan Faces in Trying to Stymie Castro

Six past Presidents learned the hard way: Neither threats nor concessions deflect Cuba's ruler from promoting worldwide revolution.

President Reagan's effort to neutralize Fidel Castro's troublemaking in Central America comes up against a 23-year record of U.S. frustration—and disenchantment—in dealing with the Cuban dictator.

When Castro seized power in Havana in 1959, Washington nurtured hopes he would emerge as a reform-minded friend in the Caribbean and accepted at face value his assurance that he was no Communist.

But the rebel leader quickly shed his image as a Latin American Robin Hood and brought into the open his commitment to Marxism and global revolution.

Now President Reagan, like every Chief Executive since Dwight D. Eisenhower, is grappling with the exasperating problem of how best to cope with Castro. The immediate source of concern: The Cuban leader's renewed efforts to promote revolution in Central America and the Caribbean.

His support is seen by administration officials as crucial to the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, and he now is accused of backing rebels in El Salvador with arms, training and advice.

Those who know the Cuban President best say there is scant prospect of inducing him to renounce aid to revolutionary movements in Central America and elsewhere around the globe.

They emphasize that he views himself as a latter-day Simón Bolívar liberating the world's downtrodden.

The notion that U.S. policy drove Castro to embrace Communism and collaboration with Russia is dismissed by most Cuba watchers. They say he was committed to Marxism and revolution long before the disastrous U.S.-backed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. Whatever policy the U.S. had pursued, these observers question whether Castro could have been diverted from the course he has chosen.

In fact, even before he launched his own revolution in Cuba, [illegible] ring [illegible]

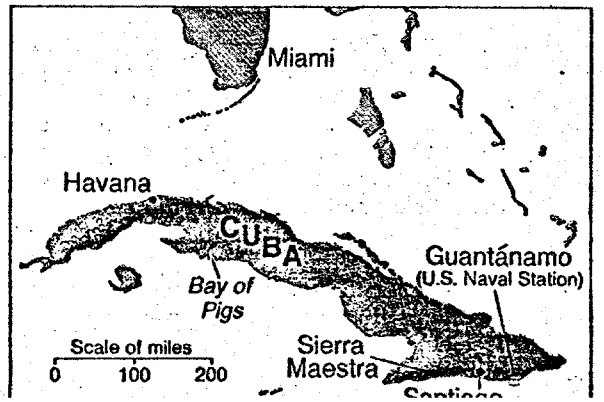
bean and Latin American governments. In 1947, for instance, he took part in a failed Cuban guerrilla mission aimed at toppling the government of the Dominican Republic. Then, a year later, he is believed to have been involved in bloody antigovernment riots in Bogotá, Colombia.

Castro's evolution as a Communist is filled with contradiction. His revolt—the 26th of July Movement—did not have the support of Cuba's own Communist Party, which viewed him as a reckless adventurer lacking in political ideals.

In leading a revolution in Cuba, he held out the promise not of Marxism but of relief from the tyranny and corruption of Fulgencio Batista's regime. And apart from Ernesto "Ché" Guevara and a few other hard-line leftists, his ragged guerrilla force in the Sierra Maestra included few known Communists.

At the University of Havana Law School, the unpredictable Castro ended up denouncing the Communists after first persuading them to support him in student elections. The campus was a hotbed of revolutionary fervor, much of it leftist and virulently anti-American. Castro talked not of political ideology or the despised Yankees, but of patriotism and the need to rid Cuba of pervasive corruption.

Early Marxist links. Castro never openly espoused Communism before the revolution, although he was influenced by Marxists during his early years. As a young man, he had close ties to a Communist who served as Batista's first labor czar, and, in childhood, he was tutored by a well-known Cuban Marxist. At age 13, Castro organized a labor strike against his own wealthy



In power: Castro is dedicated Communist, Soviet partner in global troublemaking.

father's sugar-cane plantation, asserting that the land belonged to the people.

His brother Raúl, who became Cuba's defense chief, was much more openly pro-Communist. He made several trips behind the iron curtain as a student and was a delegate to a Communist youth conference.

Some Cuba watchers believe Raúl was the "evil genius" of the revolution who guided Castro into Marxism. But more widely accepted is the view that the headstrong Fidel kept his own counsel and exploited widespread anti-Americanism in Cuba to consolidate his hold on power. This led him to turn to Russia for assistance and security.

His first attempt to overthrow Batista was a humiliating disaster. Castro was captured when he and a few other rebels botched a guerrilla assault on an army outpost in 1953. After serving two years in prison, he was released by Batista under a general amnesty for political prisoners.

Castro went into exile, first in the United States, then in Mexico where he promptly formed a new revolutionary movement. His manifesto appealed "to all Cubans who sincerely desire to re-establish political democracy and to implant social justice in Cuba."

He and a handful of followers began in secret to school themselves in guerrilla-warfare tactics and to raise money for arms from sources inside Cuba. Mexican authorities reported that at least seven of the 20 men who formed Castro's inner circle were dedicated Communists. Uneasy about his presence in the country, the Mexicans harassed Castro and periodically raided his hideouts.

After 18 months in Mexico, Castro [illegible] her rebels